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Global Development and Human (In)security: understanding the rise of the Rajah Solaiman Movement and Balik Islam in the Philippines

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ABSTRACT *Over the past 30 years rapid advances in the realm of digital technology and the establishment of an ever expanding globally networked communications infrastructure have radically altered the infrastructure of the global economy. Combined with new rules for international finance, the deregulation of capital and labour markets and the embracing of a 'free trade' ethos by most states in the international system, today's 'information age' bears little resemblance to the economic world experienced by previous generations. Rapid economic changes have been accompanied by the broad dissemination of social, cultural and political information to all corners of the globe, a phenomenon that has contributed to a number of important socio-political developments. Using social movement theory to frame our analytical narrative, we investigate how the demands and pressures of globalisation have helped to foment 'Balik Islam', a religious-based social movement concentrated among the ranks of returned overseas Filipino workers in the northern island of Luzon. These workers, having converted from Catholicism to Islam while employed in the Middle East, are beginning to reshape the political fabric of the Republic of the Philippines, sometimes in a violent fashion. To illustrate the possible extremes of Balik Islam, the article will chart the rise and fall of the Rajah Solaiman Movement, a Balik-Islam group that was responsible for a number of recent terrorist attacks, and whose members, thanks to their ability to blend in with the dominant population, pose a special challenge to democracy.*

For as long as we have stood erect, humans have walked, ridden, sledded, skied, skated or paddled from place to place on this planet. Indeed, for most of our comparably short history, a core theme has been that of humans

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conquering the challenges of nature. In the telling of this story, humans have 'moved on' and conquered until we could move and conquer no more, only ceasing our entropic diasporas when restrained by physical limits. When we dared venture beyond technology's reach to cope with physical extremes, the extremes of nature have killed us. However, the ubiquitous 'fear of death' that has tempered our adventures into the unknown has been continually counterbalanced by our seemingly insatiable desire to conquer space, place, time and, more importantly for the subject matter of this contribution, each other. During these migrations humans have transported material items in the form of food, clothing, weapons, tools, trade goods and talismans; biological elements in the form of microbes, pollen, viruses (and the variations of our own DNA); and, last but not least, our divergent 'cultures' in the form of knowledge, ideals, learned behaviours, and shared activity patterns. Eventually, with the coming of 'modernity' in the industrial and post-industrial ages of the 19th and 20th centuries, many of the historic physical obstacles were greatly reduced, if not entirely eliminated. Thinking temporally, the changes we have wrought are breathtaking, but are not without contradictions. Indeed, in less than the lifespan of a giant tortoise, humans have gone from travelling on land via ox-power—and crossing the oceans under sail—to safely landing on the Moon. As such, during the first decade of the 21st century, humanity has now shifted from one of survival against the elements to one of survival against each other. Certainly it is true that some migrants (for instance those crossing the US–Mexican border in the desolate Arizona desert) still die when attempting to find peace, solace or a job in another country. But it is also the case that migrants today arrive safely at their planned destination by means of a pleasant (and often perfectly legal) ride in a plane, ship, train, bus or car. More noteworthy, perhaps, is the observation of how the rendering moot of physical obstacles by means of increasingly safe, cheap and widely available transport has been paralleled by correspondingly rapid increases in the diffusion of cultures across political and geographic boundaries. It is the rapid diffusion of cultures, in combination with the emancipation of information via the internet, that has generated new forms of cross-culture co-operation, as well as violence. Our focus in this contribution is on the latter. While we recognise that cross-cultural discord and violence have always been part of human migrations over the ages, and that today's 'clash of civilisations'¹ is a challenge for almost all regime types, we argue that today's new forms of political violence pose a qualitatively unique challenge to liberal democratic societies. For the purposes of the point we want to emphasise here, we are not engaging the causes of migration, although we recognise that, even in this example, the migrants are primarily those who are economically vulnerable and thus take up positions to work (mostly) as labourers in the Middle East.

Drawing on social movement theory (as originally formulated by Doug McAdam and refined by others²) to inform our analysis, we investigate how the demands and pressures of globalisation have helped to foment 'Balik Islam', a religious-based social movement concentrated among the ranks of

returned overseas Filipino workers in the northern island of Luzon. These workers, having converted from Catholicism to Islam while employed in the Middle East, are beginning to reshape the political fabric of the Republic of the Philippines, sometimes in a violent fashion. To illustrate the possible extremes of Balik Islam, this contribution will chart the rise and fall of the Rajah Solaiman Movement (RSM), a group responsible for a number of horrific terrorist attacks which, starting possibly as early as 2003, have killed, maimed or injured hundreds of Filipinos. Our study of this group reveals that today's globalised world creates a set of circumstances, opportunities and challenges that creates significant new security problems for the governmental representatives of democratic states.

Historical background

After 11 September 2001 a renewed focus on international terrorism exposed an interesting and new socio-religious development that had been on the rise incognito within many parts of the world. Small groups of individuals, having converted to some of the most conservative or fundamentalist forms of Islam, had become the leading agents in planning and executing terrorist acts.³ The RSM in the Philippines has emerged as part of this violent segment of today's radical Islam. RSM arose out of the ranks of different organisations within the Balik Islam Movement (BIM), which is one of the fastest growing social movements in the Philippines today.⁴ Adherents to Balik Islam, or 'revert to Islam', are a loose conglomeration of Filipino former Christians who believe that the Philippines was a Muslim country before Western colonisation, and that all Filipinos need to 'revert' back to their original faith.⁵ Although the broader-based BIM served to greatly facilitate RSM's emergence, the latter represents only a very small portion of BIM members, most of whom promote the peaceful creation of an autonomous Islamic homeland on the island of Luzon—which is the geographic seat of power in the Philippines. As self-described 'radicals' in their Islamic preferences, members of RSM have strong ties with the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG), the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), the regional terrorist group Jemaah Islamiah (JI) and various other international terrorist groups (such as al-Qaeda), from which it has received funding. Because of this transnational quality, some Philippine security experts consider RSM to be one of the most serious threats to the Philippines.⁶

RSM (also known as RSIM—or the Rajah Solaiman Islamic Movement) was founded by Ahmed Santos, who was born Hilarion Del Rosario Santos III, on 12 March 1971 in Anda, Pangasinan in the northern Philippines. He is the eldest of three brothers who, according to Santos, were all raised as 'hard-core Roman Catholics' by their grandfather,⁷ a former military officer.⁸ After completing high school and working through a short computer course in Manila, the young and impressionable Santos, being inspired by their heroic imagery and reputation for fighting prowess, attempted to join the US Marines.⁹ After failing to obtain an enlistment, and dissatisfied by his

economic prospects in Manila, Santos joined the Philippines Overseas Foreign Worker (OFW) programme, through which he found work in Saudi Arabia. The OFW programme is a key conduit of globalisation in the Philippines today. It grew substantially after 1974 when Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos enacted a new labour code that allowed a considerable increase in the number of Filipino workers permitted to work in the Middle East. By the end of 2001 there were 915 239 Filipinos in Saudi Arabia and 1.5 million throughout the Middle East.¹⁰ In 2003 the Middle East continued to be the top destination for land-based Filipino contract workers, accounting for 32% of the total number of OFWs.¹¹ According to Santos, Saudi firms who hire OFWs conduct a 'pre-departure' briefing for incoming workers that includes an initial indoctrination about Islam.

From 1992 to 1993 Santos worked for Alkhatan, a contractor of Aramco, in the eastern province of Saudi Arabia. In 1992, while tiredly walking down a hot dusty road, Santos hitched an air-conditioned ride with a Wahhabist preacher, and 'within three hours of conversation' had decided to convert to the Islamic faith.¹² After his conversion, he spent two years, from 1993 to 1995, undergoing an educational orientation to Islam. During his studies he met Mohammed Jamal Khalifa, the brother-in-law of Osama Bin Laden, who was responsible for establishing al-Qaeda networks within the Philippines.¹³

In 1995 Santos formed the Fi Sabillah Dawah (roughly translated, 'inviting people to the cause of Allah') and Media Foundation, Inc (FSDMFI) to propagate 'the true essence of Islam and to correct the misconception about Islam and Muslims'.¹⁴ Santos broadcast his message through a weekly radio programme and by screening film clips depicting the mistreatment of Muslims throughout the world.¹⁵ Santos's proselytising radio programme also helped him establish contacts with the leaders of the MILF, one of the main Islamic insurgent groups on the strategic southern island of Mindanao.¹⁶

In 1999 Ahmed Santos complete the *Haj* (a pilgrimage to Mecca and one of the five pillars of Islam) and upon his return to Manila joined the group Islamic Studies Call and Guidance (ISCAG), which is a legal organisation that solicits funds and donations from the Middle East to purchase religious publications and other materials for missionary work.¹⁷ According to Professor Rommel Banlaoi, the leading Philippine scholar studying radical Islam, the idea of organising RSM was probably 'conceptualized at the FSDMFI Office at Cubao, Quezon City during 2000 and 2001 in order to have a legitimate [cover] organization', and the 'core members of the FSDMFI were the individuals who formed the core membership of the RSIM'.¹⁸ Taking a position far beyond many other groups in the Balik Islam Movement, RSM was founded with the main objective of converting the whole of the Philippines to Islam, arguing that the Philippines was once a Muslim country before Spanish colonisation.¹⁹ RSM was named in honour of Rajah Solaiman, a Filipino Muslim who ruled the Manila area before the Spanish conquest in the 15th century. Solaiman was reportedly a grandson of the Sultan of Brunei and a scion of the Bornean dynasty.²⁰

Santos's marriage to his second wife, Nurain Dongon, established a familial link between RSM and the Abu Sayyaf ('bearer of the sword') Group (ASG), one of the Philippines' most notorious militant Islamist separatist groups.²¹ One of Nurain's three sisters is married to Kadafi Janjalani, ASG's leader at the time, while the other sister is married to Jainal Sali, ASG's second-in-command. Santos also developed a support network outside the Philippines. He went on a pilgrimage to Mecca in March 1999 and worked with the Islamic Wisdom Worldwide Mission (IWWM). His contacts among different organisations established through his relationship with Mohammed Jamal Khalifa (bin Laden's brother-in-law), Santos gained access to funds for the expansion of his activities in the Philippines.²²

In 2001 Ruben Lavilla, an Ilongo (Filipino ethnic group from the central Philippines), joined Santos and became RSM's spiritual adviser. Lavilla, who earned a degree in chemical engineering from the University of the Philippines, is also a graduate of the University of Medina, where he specialised in Islamic jurisprudence, trained with Kadafi Janjalani at the Darul Imam Shafi'ie Academy in Marawi City in 1992, and established connections in Saudi Arabia and in other countries in the Middle East.²³ Santos claims to have initially met Lavilla at the Indonesian embassy in Makati City during a prayer session. After their initial meeting Santos invited Lavilla to produce lectures for Santos' radio programme and to lead studies in Anda, Pangasinan.²⁴ Santos describes Lavilla as 'well-educated, persuasive, and a very intelligent man'.²⁵ He is considered a strong advocate of Wahhabism (the conservative Saudi doctrine of Islam) and is believed to have taken part in the Chechen jihad. He is also the former president of the ISCAP in Cavite, a city on the southern shores of Manila Bay.²⁶ Lavilla served as the conduit of funds from the organisations in the Middle East, and is known as a *mufti*, an Islamic scholar who can interpret *Shariah*, or the Islamic laws, and issue verdicts.²⁷

The existence of RSM was first uncovered in 2002 after police executed a series of operations in the province of Pangasinan, although as early as December 2001 Philippine police were receiving reports on a new group of individuals conducting meetings in a remote village of Mal-Ong, in Santos's home town of Anda. Follow-up police operations revealed the presence of a *madrassa* (an Islamic school), which operated as a training area for radical Islamic teachings as well as an evening meeting place for members.²⁸ On 1 May 2002 a shooting incident occurred in the village of San Nicolas in Tarlac City between Philippine National Police (PNP) elements and two armed men who police later identified as Islamic converts. Police killed one (Khalid Trinidad) and captured the other (Dexter Payumo), who confirmed the presence of a training camp for militant Islamic converts on Santos's property in Anda. Based on information provided by Payumo, Philippine authorities raided the compound on 1 May 2002, arresting six people and recovering firearms, training and bomb-making materials and documents directly linking the group to the MILF.²⁹ This evidence allowed police to conduct follow-up operations that would later reveal the existence of RSM.³⁰

Theoretical considerations

For our purposes here it is helpful to understand RSM's emergence in terms of social movement theory. Many assume that social movements emerge when individuals become angry enough about some social condition that they organise in order to bring about change. While there is certainly an element of truth in this assumption, in most societies there are plenty of individuals dissatisfied with the status quo, but few become activists or form a social movement.³¹ Instead, other factors need to fall into place before a social movement can form. The model of social movement emergence that we draw on is Doug McAdam's 'political process model'.³² This model takes into account the opportunities that shape the actions of social movements, the variables internal to movements (such as organisation, commitment, responsibility, beliefs and values) but also the external constraints upon their emergence.³³ McAdam posits that, in order for a movement to successfully mobilise, not only do people need to harbour grievances of some kind, but they also 1) need to recognise that they share their grievances with others and that together they can do something about them (ie *development of an insurgent consciousness*); 2) need to have access to enough internal resources (wealth, potential members, leaders, meeting places, etc) in order to mobilise on their own without having to rely on external funding (ie *increase in indigenous organisational strength*); and 3) the broader political environment needs to become 'open' to social movement formation (ie *expansion of political opportunities*). McAdam's political process model is illustrated in Figure 1.

In isolation none of the factors identified above is sufficient to generate and sustain a social movement. When they converge, however, a social movement's emergence becomes more likely. Specifically, when expanding political opportunities interact with strong indigenous organisations, they provide potential insurgents with the 'structural potential' for collective action; this interaction can lead to the development of an insurgent consciousness which, in turn, can transform the movement's 'structural potential' into an actual insurgency if sufficient resources are available.³⁴ What is more, a single event

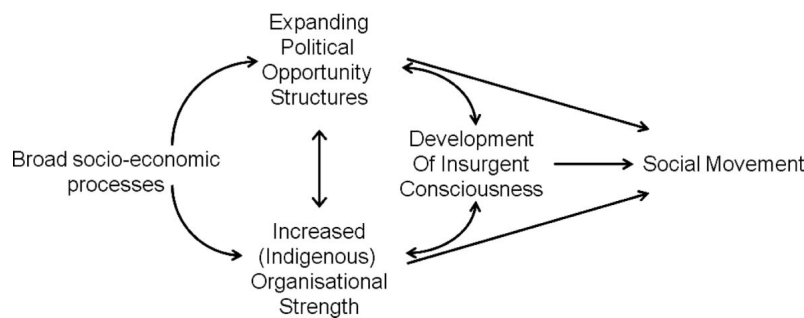


FIGURE 1. Doug McAdam's political process model of movement emergence.

can affect more than one factor. For instance, the collapse of the cotton industry in the southern USA not only created political opportunities for southern Blacks, but it led to an increase in the resources available to them as increasing numbers moved from rural to urban settings and took up higher-paying employment.³⁵

Expanding political opportunities: grievances, instability and ideology

Minority populations generally face numerous challenges in attempting to bring about societal change, and opportunities for overcoming such challenges are rare and tend to fluctuate over time. Indeed, only when such opportunities expand to a significant degree can budding social movements have any hope of mobilising successfully. What factors lead to the expansion of such opportunities? According to McAdam,

Any event or broad social process that serves to undermine the calculations and assumptions on which the political establishment is structured occasions a shift in political opportunities. Among the events and processes likely to prove disruptive of the political status quo are wars, industrialization, international political realignments, prolonged unemployment, and widespread demographic changes.³⁶

Expanding political opportunities manifest themselves in three broad forms: 1) 'political instability'; 2) 'enhanced political positions of the aggrieved populations'; and 3) 'ideological openness'.³⁷

Political instability occurs when elite control of the existing power structure weakens. Of course, such circumstances reflect a crisis of legitimacy of a given social and political order. In order to maintain the status quo, dominant groups must expend their political capital and resources to counter movements which are attempting to exploit the instability.³⁸ Short-duration events, such as economic crises, armed conflict and traumatic world events (war, pestilence, drought, tsunami, earthquake, etc), can rattle the existing political structure and raise the possibility of policy reforms that benefit aggrieved populations.³⁹ A relative increase in the political position (ie power) of aggrieved populations can result from broad social changes that occur over extended periods of time. Successful insurgencies typically do not emerge merely because of widespread political instability, but also because of broad social processes that have strengthened the aggrieved population's political power.⁴⁰ 'Consequently, the increase in political opportunity through enhanced political positions for movement groups is usually achieved more gradually than through political instability.'⁴¹ Finally, broad social changes can lead the social environment to tolerate alternative, critical and even subversive ideas and world-views espoused by the aggrieved population and other associated movements.⁴² 'Since the exercise of power is often closely linked to the manipulation of ideas, the expansion of freedom of thought and expression combined with an influx of creative, critical ideas

may result in a marked increase in political opportunity for potential movement groups.⁴³

What needs to be emphasised here is that the *relative* expansion of political opportunities is what matters. For instance, in the USA in 1955 the political opportunities available to African Americans in the former Confederate States were limited, but compared with the opportunities available to them in 1930, their opportunities had expanded considerably.⁴⁴ Nevertheless, we need to be cautious in our use and identification of 'political opportunities' with regard to RSM. As Gamson and Meyer have warned, 'the concept of political opportunity structure is in trouble...It threatens to become an all-encompassing fudge factor for all the conditions and circumstances that form the context for collective activism. Used to explain much, it may ultimately explain nothing at all.'⁴⁵ Hence, when it comes to identifying the political opportunities available to RSM, we need to show how specific changes in the external environment (ie external to RSM) provided Santos and his band of followers the opportunity to mobilise.

The Moro conflict: students and insurgents

The rise of student activism and the political awakening of student sectors in major colleges and universities in the early 1970s helped contribute to the Philippine government's political instability, thereby expanding the political opportunities available to various Muslim secessionist movements in the Philippines. As urbanisation dramatically increased, student activism emerged in the metro area. At the same time international events abroad showcased students influencing their local governments. The University of the Philippines, one of the leading educational institutions in the country, became the birthplace of the Muslim secessionist movement ideology. Nur Misuari, a young Muslim professor from the university, organised the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) as an 'instrument for the liberation of the Moro nation'.⁴⁶ Indeed, Misuari became a symbol for the 'free and independent state of the *Bangsa Moro* people in Mindanao'.⁴⁷ Inspired by both the Mindanao Independence Movement (MIM) of the late 1960s and the 1968 'Jabidah Massacre',⁴⁸ Filipino Muslims engaged in student activism and other major protest actions against the government.⁴⁹ The ideological foundations of other prominent Muslim scholars, such as Hashim Salamat (who later founded the Moro Islamic Liberation Front, and whose teachings became the basis of RSM's neo-fundamentalist ideology), were formed through their educational experiences in the Middle East.⁵⁰

Looking at the foundation of the MNLF rebellion, religious differences have partly shaped the conflict. However, the rebellion is also rooted in the clash of interests over land and other natural resources, as well as the identity issues surrounding the second-class status perceived by much of the Moro population.⁵¹ The MNLF was a nationalist movement modelled after other anti-colonial resistance organisations that were common in many parts of the Third World in the 1960s (the FLN in Algeria, the PLO, etc). The MNLF aimed to mobilise the general Moro support as the base for the recruitment, training

and equipping of armed cadres to resist Philippine imperial government. Having obtained international support for the justness of its cause, the MNLF organised itself with the ultimate aim of achieving Moro political independence from the Philippines.⁵² The event that served as the tipping point for the formation of the MNLF was the so-called 'Jabidah massacre' of Muslim conscript soldiers on the island of Corregidor in March 1968. The Moro soldiers at that time were being trained to conduct covert military operations in Sabah, (a province of Malaysia since 1963) upon which the Philippines maintains a historic claim. Upon learning the purpose of their training, the soldiers mutinied, but were killed in cold blood to ensure their silence.⁵³

The escalation of the Mindanao conflict was precipitated by two events in 1971 and 1972 that resulted in full-scale war between the MNLF and the government of the Philippines. First, the Muslim representatives were swept from office during the congressional elections held in November 1971. The growing insecurity in Mindanao led many Christians who had previously voted for Muslim candidates as a guarantee of their security now to express their lack of confidence in the Muslim *datus* by voting for Christian candidates. As a result, political power in areas that historically had been part of the sultanates shifted from Muslims to Christians.⁵⁴

Second, President Ferdinand Marcos declared martial law throughout the Philippines. From the perspective of many Muslims the declaration was a catalyst for the Moro rebellion. It was perceived as a declaration of war against a defeated people who now had no option except that of resistance.⁵⁵ Eventually the war on Mindanao de-escalated upon the intercession of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (led by Libya), which helped bring about a ceasefire and then an autonomy agreement in Tripoli in December 1976.⁵⁶ This accord provided for an immediate cessation of armed hostilities between the two parties and established the framework for the eventual establishment of today's Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (ARMM).⁵⁷

The MILF is a group that splintered from the MNLF following the latter's peace deal with Philippine government. Salamat Hashim, the founder of the MILF, felt increasingly restrained by the MNLF's founder Nur Misuari. At the end of 1977 Salamat communicated to the Organization of the Islamic Conference his desire to head the 'New MNLF'.⁵⁸ Salamat's Islamic vision was later energised in wake of his experiences in Pakistan between 1982 and 1987, where he became involved with US and Saudi-funded efforts to recruit jihadists from around the world to fight against the Soviet Army's occupation Afghanistan. Administered in part by Osama bin Ladin, this global jihadist programme is said to have brought 35 000 potential fighters from different Muslim countries. The Philippine contribution of about 500 to 700 fighters was organised and co-ordinated by Hashim Salamat.⁵⁹

In 1984 Salamat officially declared the establishment of the MILF. He demanded independence and proclaimed that a Muslim state on Mindanao would be based on conservative Koranic principles. By the 1990s the MILF had achieved a military strength of about 10 000–30 000 combatants who

were spread across seven provinces in Mindanao. It operated large base camps and provided basic government services in its areas of operations, all the while conducting attacks on the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) and planting bombs in Mindanao cities. Despite numerous conflict resolution events and agreements over the past two decades, peace still eludes Mindanao in 2008.⁶⁰

The Philippine economy and peace talks

A softening in the Philippine economy that began in the 1970s and continued into the mid-1980s helped fuel (and continues to fuel) political unrest, not only in Mindanao, but also in urban centres across the country.⁶¹ In response to economic deprivation, many Filipinos, including Muslims from Mindanao, migrated from rural areas to major urban centres, leading to further increases in the unemployment rate and political unrest. Other economic conditions, such as the perceived hegemony of elites in major economic infrastructures, the unequal distribution of wealth and the exploitation of resources, contributed to this situation as well. Organisations drew their leaders from the ranks of these discontented Filipinos, including figures within the various BIM organisations and BIM's radical RSM offshoot.

The ongoing peace talks between the MILF and the Philippine government has led the MILF to distance itself from JI over the past five years. It has apparently ceased harbouring foreign terrorists (eg members of JI and other Indonesian groups, such as that of bomb-maker Noordin Top) and, while it did not explicitly endorse Philippine air strikes against suspected JI hideouts, it did not strongly condemn them either.⁶² This has led groups such as JI to find other 'partners' such as ASG and RSM. RSM, with its location in the northern Philippines is particularly attractive to JI (and ASG) because after 30 years of warfare in the southern Philippines, attacks on civilians in the north are seen as 'righteous retribution'.⁶³ Moreover, by 'extending their reach into the enemy's true heartland, JI and ASG aim to project an image of ubiquity and invincibility, seizing the offensive to distract and over-stretch security forces while gaining greater publicity than attacks in the south would produce'.⁶⁴

Increase in indigenous organisational strength

Favourable changes in the political environment only increases the probability that budding insurgent movements will be able to mobilise successfully. Whether they actually do so or not also depends on whether activists have access to the resources necessary to mobilise and sustain their cause.⁶⁵ Resources can include factors such as an increase in the education and wealth within the aggrieved population or access to the wealth of sympathetic (and often international) supporters. However, the most important resource available to insurgent groups is strong, indigenous organisations, because they contribute five key resources to a social

movement: members, leaders, feelings of group solidarity, communication networks and enterprise tools (places to meet, computers, telephones, etc).⁶⁶ Again, we wish to emphasise the importance of the relative increase in indigenous organisational strength rather than a movement's absolute strength. Using the Civil Rights Movement once more as an example, in 1955 southern African Americans were not nearly as well off in terms of levels of education, community wealth and institutional strength as were southern Whites; nevertheless, compared with their situation 25 years before, African Americans had made considerable gains in these areas, thus setting the stage for the movement to emerge.⁶⁷

As the following discussion illustrates, the Balik Islam Movement, the Overseas Filipino Workers programme and international financial support all contributed to RSM's rise, providing it with a pool of potential recruits, the training and education of future leaders, the creation of a sense of solidarity, social (communication) networks that facilitated the diffusion of the movement's ideology, and the resources (eg funds) necessary to engage in contentious activity.

The Balik Islam Movement

For a variety of reasons religion's organisational aspect is ideal for mobilising groups and individuals around shared ideological goals. One reason is because organised religion provides numerous resources necessary for collective action, such as mass membership, leadership and places to meet.⁶⁸ Another is that since a movement's ideology is subject to the same pattern of diffusion and adoption as are other innovations, a religious group's pre-existing social networks provide a means for an insurgency to propagate its message to potential recruits.⁶⁹ Finally, and perhaps most importantly, religious organisations can provide the cognitive and emotional incentives to overcome the 'free rider' problem⁷⁰ that most social movements face.⁷¹ It is one thing to believe that a philosophy is calling on you to act; it is quite another to believe that it is God commanding action to prove one's faith. 'Perhaps the most potent motivational leverage that a social movement can enjoy is the alignment of its cause with the ultimacy and sacredness associated with God's will, eternal truth, and the absolute moral structure of the universe.'⁷²

Thus, it is not surprising that the emergence of BIM was instrumental in RSM's rise. RSM emerged from the BIM, which began in the 1970s and now reportedly has over 200 000 Christian converts to the Islamic faith. Members prefer to be called 'reverts' instead of 'converts' because of their belief that the Philippines was originally a Muslim country before Western colonisation in the 15th century.⁷³ Aminkadra Undog notes, 'The first documented activity of "Balik-Islam" which has contributed to the prominence of the BIM is that of Hadji Akmad del Rio, an Ilocano who migrated to General Santos in Mindanao'.⁷⁴ After his conversion to Islam in 1981, Akmad del Rio organised a movement that solicited funds from Middle Eastern organisations such as the Saudi Arabian Islamic Missionary Council.⁷⁵

The fact that BIM has grown to become the seventh largest Muslim group in the Philippines⁷⁶ not only provided RSM with a pool of potential recruits (and the network of ties between them), but also gave it a training ground for future leaders through the mosques, *madrassas* and *pasantren* (rural Islamic boarding schools) explicitly or implicitly related to the movement.⁷⁷ Ahmed Santos, for instance, ran a *madrassa* in Pangasian, a province in central Luzon,⁷⁸ and he is a former member of ISGAG, a legal BIM organisation established in 1991 with the stated objective of soliciting Saudi donations for charitable institutions in the Philippines.⁷⁹ In addition, several prominent RSM members came from legitimate BIM organisations scattered throughout the country, such as the Balik-Islam Unity Congress (BIUC) and the Islamic Information Center (IIC).⁸⁰ Finally, BIM has drawn on RSM's relatively developed ideology in order to bind members tightly together with feelings of group solidarity and mission.

Overseas Foreign Workers programme

Not only did the weak Philippine economy lead to domestic political unrest, it also motivated a large number of Filipino workers to travel to the Middle East (Saudi Arabia in particular) through the OWF programme.⁸¹ Many of them returned home as Islamic converts.⁸² Why did they convert? Both Gilberto Teodoro Jr (the present Philippine Secretary of Defense) and Cesar Garcia, (the present Director-General of the National Intelligence Coordinating Agency) report that the majority convert out of simple pragmatism: in Saudi Arabia and other countries in the Middle East all Muslims have greater job security, higher pay and a more enhanced social status than non-believers.⁸³ However, both of these senior analysts observe that Filipinos are very 'spiritual' by nature and, when exposed to Islamic teachings while working in the Middle East, it would be natural for them to feel drawn to the dominant faith. Other analysts and adherents have suggested Filipinos convert out of a desire for community, to reduce boredom, to counter loneliness, or simply to express faith.⁸⁴ Undoubtedly an increase in the ratio of Muslim to non-Muslim ties in day-to-day activities played a crucial role in their conversion as well, since most conversions occur through close, personal ties.⁸⁵

Upon their return to the Philippines many if not most of these converts 'reverted' back to Catholicism. However, for others the conversion was genuine, with many of these new Muslims helping to form (or later joined) BIM and RSM. And it was through their globalised links to Saudi Arabia that they were able to attract funding for the establishment of Islamic schools in traditionally Christian areas of Luzon in the northern Philippines.

Needless to say, the OWF programme's 1.5 million workers provided BIM and RSM with a large pool of potential recruits. Just as importantly, however, BIMs routinely sent money they earned in the Middle East to family back home in the Philippines. Such remittances, which constituted one of the goals sought after by the Philippine government in reforming its labour policies,

have increased in recent years, and totalled over US\$2.1 billion in 2007.⁸⁶ These monies have undoubtedly proven to be a valuable internal resource on which all groups, including RSM, could draw. Indeed, given the poor state of the Philippine economy, these remittances represent a *relative* increase in power among OFWs and their families compared to other non-OFWs and their families. These Islamic families and their charitable organisations are also attractive recipient for funds from Middle East groups and organisations looking for appropriate recipients of *zakat* (the traditional Muslim tithing system, and one of the five pillars of Islam).

International linkages and support for RSM

Substantial *zakat*-generated financial support for RSM has come from Saudi-affiliated individuals and organisations, such as the International Islamic Relief Organization (IIRO), which was the primary Muslim NGO that provided support to Muslim organisations in the Philippines from 1995 until its closure in 2001. Osama bin Laden's brother-in-law, Mohammed Jamal Khalifa, who headed the IIRO, established several organisations in the Philippines, including the Al-Makdum University in Zamboanga, which provided student scholarships and charitable support to displaced Muslims. Unfortunately, in addition to these legitimate activities, the IIRO also channelled funding to terrorist groups operating within the Philippines.⁸⁷

RSM also relied on its international linkages to expand its influence and organisation. General Rodolfo 'Boogie' Mendoza, a high-ranking official in the Philippine National Police, reports that RSM has more ties to different Middle East organisations than any other Filipino terrorist group.⁸⁸ Ahmed Santos, for example, had established links with ASG and MILF; which both advocate an independent Islamic state of the Southern Philippines; JI, which functions as al-Qaeda's representative in Southeast Asia; and with various Islamic NGOs in the Middle East for training and financial support. These ties have proved to be beneficial. For example, ASG leader Khadafy Janjalani reportedly gave RSM the equivalent of around \$200 000 in order to jump start its operations in Manila,⁸⁹ and the MILF and ASG have provided RSM with training and other logistical elements necessary for the growth of the organisation. Considering that most terrorist strikes in the Philippines reportedly cost in the neighbourhood of \$5 000 to finance,⁹⁰ a \$200 000 capital infusion goes a long way in providing sufficient resources for a group to conduct operations.

Development of an insurgent consciousness

People who are content with the current political and social climate are unlikely to form or participate in a movement to bring about social change. Rather, a social movement draws people who are unhappy with or 'excluded' (perceived or real) from governance, ultimately reflecting a crisis of legitimacy of a given democratic form. Nevertheless, discontent by itself

does not produce social movements; there needs to be a transformation of consciousness. People must recognise that they share these grievances with others and believe that they can do something about them. Put simply, they must experience some sort of cognitive realisation that change is not only necessary, but also possible. Smith calls this transformation 'the development of an insurgent consciousness', which is a 'collective state of understanding' that perceives, interprets and explains a social situation in such a way that it compels people to organise and act in order to change the social situation.⁹¹ An incipient social movement cannot expect that all potential members will be able to fully understand the group's ideology, however. Thus, group elites generally reduce their group's core message to generalised ideological snippets that are easily communicated to (and resonate with) potential followers and the general public.⁹² Social movement theorists refer to this reduction process as 'framing'.⁹³ What becomes important for us, then, is identifying not only the grievances that helped give rise to RSM but also how RSM's leaders framed the movement's ideology in ways that helped them attract and retain followers.

The rise of Islamic converts and the RSM are a direct result of a people's desire to fight against the perceived neglect and oppression of Filipino Muslims at the hands of the dominant Christian population. Four decades of recent Moro conflict and centuries of struggle for self-determination helped to create this 'frame of injustice', which has become an inspiration for Philippine Islamic converts. RSM's erstwhile northern Christians identify with these southern Filipino Muslims, whom they see as victims of injustice, oppression, government neglect and other social injustices inherent in the Philippine political, social and economic environment. RSM's resulting insurgent consciousness was further reinforced by the sense of solidarity arising out of conflicts in the Middle East, Iraq, Bosnia and other parts of the world. For instance, the Director General of the National Intelligence Coordinating Agency (NICA) notes that the 'war in Iraq influenced the radicalization of the Filipinos'.⁹⁴

The Moro conflict

The decades-long Moro conflict in Mindanao provided the ideological basis for the birth and growth of Islamic converts and RSM.⁹⁵ Soliman Santos describes the conflict as the 'clash between two imagined nations or nationalisms' and identifies the Moro conflict's features as: 1) economic marginalisation; 2) political domination; 3) physical insecurity; 4) threatened Moro and Islamic identity; 5) perception that the government is the principal party to blame; and 6) perception of hopelessness under the present establishment.⁹⁶ In recruiting for RSM, Ahmed Santos capitalised on these opportunities to 'further his goal of propagating the true essence of Islam and to correct misconceptions about Islam and Muslims'.⁹⁷ Santos envisioned first establishing an Islamic community on his own property in the northern Philippines where, as at the MILF's Camp Abu Bakar in Mindanao, Muslims could practice the true teachings of Islam.⁹⁸ He used his organisation

(Fi Sabillah Dawah and Media Foundation, Inc) as a legal cover while effectively using print and media outlets to promote Wahhabism, jihad and Islamic purity.

The Moro conflict also helped established Santos's and RSM's link to Muslim groups such as the MILF and the ASG.⁹⁹ The alleged abuses committed against Muslims in the Philippines and throughout the world became the rallying point in recruitment and propagation of RSM's Islamic teachings. The issues of Christian domination of Muslim lands, the exploitation of Mindanao's natural resources by Christian and international elites, and the lack of concern and representation in the central government are major grievances that Santos formerly decried in propaganda efforts aimed at attracting possible recruits in Luzon.

The RSM first established links with the MILF in 2000. Hashim Salamat, the founder and former MILF chairman, reportedly provided financial and logistical support to the RSM. Further, Salamat allowed RSM members to train in bomb-making and other terrorist tactics with the JI in MILF camps at their Mindanao bases. According to documents recovered by the Philippine authorities, MILF Chairman Ahod Ibrahim, known as Al Haj Murad, provided Santos with a certificate of endorsement on 7 April 2000 to solicit funds for *da'wah* operations.¹⁰⁰

After a raid on the RSM camp in Anda in 2002, Ahmed Santos advised RSM members to hide in RSM-SOG (Special Operations Group) camps in Mindanao.¹⁰¹ However, before this, Armed Forces Philippine (AFP) reports state that Santos had already attended training in MILF camps. Evidence of this was found in captured documents after an 'all out war' was launched by AFP against the MILF in 2000. According to RSM documents and other materials later seized by authorities from the facility at Anda and from the FSDMFI offices in Quezon City, there were letters from the MILF Vice-Chairman for Internal Affairs allocating support to the RSM. There were also records of MILF and RSM personalities and transactions revealing that captured MILF-SOG member Abdul Manap Mentang had links to Ahmed Santos and to other RSM members.¹⁰²

The RSM has also established links with the regional terrorist network, JI. Santos and other RSM members joined the training conducted by the JI in March 2004 at MILF camps in Mindanao. JI instructors directed this training, which focused on demolition, explosives and weapons (*kital jihad*), under the protection of the MILF.¹⁰³ Top JI operatives in the Philippines, such as Fathur Roman Al Ghozi, Taufiq Refqi, Rohmat (alias Zaki), and Zulikpli, maintained relationships with Santos and the RSM. When the Philippine authorities arrested Refqi in Cotabato City in 2003, they recovered documents linking Santos and the RSM to JI-planned bombing operations in various locations throughout the Philippines. Zaki, another well known JI operative in the Philippines, was the primary instructor of RSM members in the four-month explosives and demolition training in Mount Cararao, an MLF camp located in the boundary of the province of Lanao del Sur and Maguindanao in the Southern Philippines.¹⁰⁴

Ideological formation

RSM drew on a well established tradition in the development of its ideology, taping the knowledge gained in higher education by Nur Misuari, Hashim Salamat and Abdurajak Janjalani. The MNLF founder Nur Misuari studied at the University of the Philippines during the time when student activism reached its peak in the fight against the Marcos administration.¹⁰⁵ He received a government scholarship through the Commission on National Integration (CNI), a programme aimed at providing quality education to young and deserving Muslim students. While studying in Manila, he encountered a strong anti-Muslim culture, which contributed to the development of his frustration with existing Christian-dominated institutions.¹⁰⁶ His experience was not an isolated one; McKenna observes that 'by 1968, the CNI scholarship program had unintentionally created a group of young Muslim intellectuals schooled in political activism'.¹⁰⁷ Hashim Salamat received a scholarship in the Middle East at the Al-Azhar University in Egypt, where he came under the influence of the ideas of Muslim Brotherhood leader Sayed Qutb, considered by many analysts to be the most influential radical Islamist thinker of the 20th century.¹⁰⁸ Contemporaries of his at the University in Cairo, such as Burhanuddin Rabanni, Abdul Rasul Sayyaf and prominent mujahedeen leaders from the Soviet-Afghan war¹⁰⁹ contributed to his ideological formation as well.

Abdurajak Janjalani's religious training in Libya in 1988, his subsequent participation in the Soviet-Afghan war and his work with ASG helped form RSM's ideological goals.¹¹⁰ Both ASG and RSM share similar objectives. While ASG is seeking to establish an independent Islamic state in the Southern Philippines, RSM is labouring for the same goal in the north.¹¹¹ Finally, Ahmed Santos and Ruben 'Omar' Lavilla are not without educational resources themselves. Both received educational training in the Middle East. Lavilla is a graduate of the Islamic University of Medina, where he specialised in *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence), and Santos underwent the Saudi *daawa* activity conducted by the Ministry of Islamic Affairs, Endowments, Propagation and Guidance.

Framing the movement

As noted above, social movements generally do not expect that all potential members will have a formal education adequate for fully understanding the group's ideology. In order to overcome this obstacle, leaders reduce their message to generalised ideological snippets that are easily repeated and resonate with a group's target audience.¹¹² This is evident in RSM's continued reference to issues of 'ancestral domain', 'self determination' and 'reverts' (rather than converts) that help it frame its cause in the eyes of potential recruits. In addition, RSM draws its name from Rajah Solaiman, a Filipino Muslim ruler of Manila before the Spanish conquest in the 15th century, who many believe to be a grandson of the Sultan of Brunei and a scion of the Bornean dynasty, in order to emphasise its connection with

the past.¹¹³ This choice is not without irony according to Professor Banlaoi, who observes, 'Rajah Solaiman was a Spanish collaborator during the Spanish period... Thus, organizing a Muslim liberation movement in his honor is an apparent contradiction.'¹¹⁴ However, as Robinson notes, it is not uncommon for movement frames to be historically inaccurate or to contradict one another.¹¹⁵ Most social movement participants are not historical scholars; what is important is whether the frame strikes a chord, not whether it accurately captures historic or present reality. Thus, by constructing a narrative of rebellion imagined upon a historic figure, Ahmed Santos exhibited a keen understanding of what was needed to foment discord in Philippine society.

Conclusion

Just after midnight on 27 February 2004 3.6 kilograms of dynamite hidden inside a television and placed in a box exploded onboard the *MV Super Ferry 14*. This Philippine-registered passenger ship regularly carried hundreds of passengers from Manila to Davao City in the Southern Philippines. The explosion set the passenger ship afire, and caused 416 casualties (116 dead, 300 injured).¹¹⁶ Even though the Abu Sayyaf Group immediately claimed the incident, Philippine authorities later learned that the ferry incident was a joint operation conducted by combined elements of the ASG and RSM.¹¹⁷ A year later, on 14 February 2005, RSM struck again, with simultaneous bombings in three major Philippine cities. These incidents, known collectively as the 'Valentine's Day bombing', occurred in Makati Central Business District in Metro Manila, and at Davao City and General Santos City (both in the Southern Philippines). The attacks, which caused the death of four people and wounded over 100, showed a sophisticated level of co-ordination and planning that inspired the state authorities to mount a serious and sustained response.¹¹⁸ In March 2005 Philippine authorities prevented a major ASG-RSM terrorist plot in a raid that recovered 10 sacks (600kg) of explosive materials at an RSM safe house in Quezon City. The terrorists' plan was supposedly to be carried out during the Christian Lenten season and it called for the exploding the bombs in areas frequented by US nationals throughout Manila.¹¹⁹ The terrorists envisioned that this operation, code-named 'Operation Big Bang', would produce results similar to the Indonesian Bali bombing. The operation would utilise a 'truck bomb' to target the 'LA Café', a popular nightspot in Malate and one of Manila's tourist districts.¹²⁰ During his interrogation RSM member Pio De Vera admitted that Ahmed Santos had asked him to prepare a car bomb with a maximum capacity of 1000 kilos of explosives to bomb a target frequented by foreign nationals. He further revealed that the operation would be a suicide bombing or a 'martyrdom operation' of the RSM.¹²¹

From 2005 to 2007 the RSM lost many of its key leaders to intensified police and military operations, and it did not carry out any activities of significance. Since the arrest of Ahmed Santos in 2005 the RSM has been forced to focus on reorganisation and recruitment. However, on 19 October 2007 the RSM

suddenly re-emerged in the spotlight when its spiritual leader, Ruben ‘Omar’ Lavilla, claimed responsibility for the ‘Glorietta bombing’ in the heart of the Makati business district in Manila. Even though extensive investigations ruled out the possibility of a terrorist attack (the explosion was caused by a gas leak), the RSM was resurrected in the minds of the Filipino people.¹²²

Even if RSM has been effectively degraded or destroyed as a terrorist organisation, the group and its activities must be considered in terms of both global and local implications. Viewed from the analytical lens of social movement theory, the three required elements for the re-emergence RSM (or its replacement by a new group)—insurgent consciousness, resources and political opportunities—all remain largely unchanged. Indeed, the continuing emergence of the so-called ‘global Jihad’ provides solid evidence that an Islamist insurgent consciousness has solidified itself globally in the years following the 9/11 attacks in the USA. Thus, we concur with analysts Douglas Borer and Mark T Berger who have observed:

Among other things, what we are witnessing today is a visceral, highly politicized faith-based reaction to globalization and the crisis of the nation-state system. ‘Genuinely existing’ liberal capitalism has pushed into every corner of the globe, bringing goods, services, ideas, images, and behaviors into the homes of people of all cultures. Indeed, the ‘Western’ proponents of globalization have often argued that such a transformation would bring people together by showing them that all humans are essentially the same. However, globalization has also been a significant force in the weakening of nation-states and has also compounded state failure, or state collapse, in many cases.¹²³

Inside the Philippines, on the southernmost islands (Basilan, Jolo and Mindanao) the Moro-Islamic struggle has sustained itself for nearly a half century and, with the arrival of RSM, it is clear that its narrative of grievance has now expanded to the northern islands. However, this internal expansion of the Moro struggle has been made possible primarily by the unforeseen creation of a resource base for human and financial capital. In this case the basic resources required for rebellion (people and money) are the consequences of the decision made by the Marcos government to enter the global labour market in the 1970s. Many Filipinos now embrace Islam in the Middle East and express their faith organisationally back home in the structures of Balik Islam; a select few, like Ahmed Santos, become radicalised and turn to violence. Most interestingly, it is through this very ideological process that the tangible financial resources required for any viable social movement become obtainable. Herein lies the true and somewhat hidden power of *zakat*—one of the five pillars of Islam—which requires all the world’s Muslims to give part of their wealth to the poor. Inevitably, as global capitalism blithely and blindly expands, more and more energy is required, making the owners of the world’s primary energy resource (petroleum) very rich. Thus global Islam in general, Balik Islam in particular, and RSM in specific, are all able to tap into a huge and growing pool of *zakat*-generated venture capital that will sustain and grow their operations—be they peaceful

or deadly. It must be noted that it is also this very process of 'democracy promotion' and development through global capitalism that is producing social and economic vulnerabilities (eg unemployment, under-employment and wretched working conditions in a context of declining welfare and redistributive politics). Our example highlights the transnational context and the social and political implications of development through inequality; wealth accumulation (for some) obtained through labour insecurities (for others) leads in this case to the (re)production of wider social and political risk.

Finally, to end this contribution we must address the core question of political opportunities. Herein lies the realm where governments and policy makers have the greatest capacity to act, but not in ways that might further exacerbate crises of social and political legitimacy. Democratic rule does not imply or place emphasis on the latter (rule), but rather on the former (democracy), implying substantive democratic participation in more 'inclusive' rather than exclusionary social and political relations. While it is true that the government of the Philippines could drastically alter the OFW programme, the idea of eliminating it entirely is simply a non-viable option in the minds of present decision makers. Certainly the raw materials that generate both BIM and RSM would dry up if the OFW programme were eliminated, but when the much-needed remittances dried up, the negative economic cost to the country would generate many more problems (taking us back to the contradictions of capitalist development). However, upon being asked about more closely monitoring and controlling the OFW, a most curious and compelling 'Achilles heel' was exposed: the fundamental right of religious freedom that is a hallmark of Philippine democracy.

At this late point in our contribution, other than to acknowledge their existence, we will refrain from entering into debates over whether the Philippines is an 'oligarchic democracy', a 'cacique democracy', a 'failed democracy', a 'Semi democracy' or any other such classification that one might find in the democracy literature. Our empirical observation on Philippine democracy is this: all of the dozen or so government and military officials that we interviewed in 2008 agreed that any attempt to gather religious data on overseas workers, or to track people based on their beliefs, would be seen by most Filipinos as unconstitutional, and amounts to a 'no-go zone' for government and defence officials. As such, even though it is perfectly fine and legal for an autocratic theocracy such as Saudi Arabia to spend government money on sermonising Islam in the Philippines, as officials in Manila see it, it is neither fine nor legal for the Philippine government to do anything about Saudi proselytising. As a result, Balik Islam is likely to continue to thrive in the Philippines, and its violent branches, such as RSM may be inevitable.

What then can the Philippine government do? It is clear from our analysis that the RSM drew heavily on both technical and operational support provided by Islamist militants based in the southern Philippines. The locus of that struggle is Mindanao, and therefore, what the Philippine government

can do is to re-energise its efforts to make peace with the important stakeholders in the Moro conflict. However, that is easier said than done. Most recently, in August 2008, after years of intermittent war and various internationally led conflict-resolution endeavours, the Government of the Republic of the Philippines and the MILF signed an extensive Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) that, if implemented would have brought peace between the two.¹²⁴ However, this agreement, which resolved the issues of land rights and ancestral domain—the key source of Islamic Moro grievances against the state—was immediately challenged by a group of non-Muslims (Christians make up the majority of citizens on Mindanao) as being unconstitutional. Their petition to the Philippine Supreme Court resulted in an injunction being placed on any further government action pending a constitutional review of the MOU. This legal action, which may seem to an outside observer to illustrate of the ebb and flow of democratic governance, is much more than that to the participants. For MILF's militants this was Philippine 'democracy revealing its evil head' and, as a result, armed clashes have once again broken out on Mindanao, resulting in almost 200 new deaths and well over 300 000 displaced people.¹²⁵

From the perspective of Ahmed Santos and RSM's other radical Islamists, the court injunction may have been signed by the hand of a human judge, but the divine hand of Allah was at work. As such, at least temporarily, by not sorting out the constitutional requirements before signing the MOU, the Philippine government seems to have snatched defeat from the jaws of victory against the long-running Islamist insurgency. In doing so, the renewal of war on Mindanao has created a new political opportunity for the revival of RSM's more radical vision for Philippine society, and has provided the final requirement prescribed by social movement theory. When this observation is placed within the wider context of a development logic that displaces (in this case through what is often referred to as 'migrant' labour), the crisis of conflict and violence—without being reductive—it would appear as part of a wider crisis of development.

Notes

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- 23 *Ibid.*, p 7.
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